

Introduction to Philosophy

What Philosophy Is (and Isn't): Philosophy and Bullshit

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit".

Background

Philosophy has often been accused of being nothing but a bunch of bullshit. Rather than respond to this claim head on, it may be more interesting to philosophically examine what exactly is meant by "bullshit". In this article, Harry Frankfurt gives a preliminary sketch of an account of what bullshit is and how it is different from other modes of discourse and forms of deception. This account should suggest to you how he understands the relationship between bullshit and philosophy.

Questions

1. According to Frankfurt, what is the essence of bullshit? How does Fania Pascal's story about Ludwig Wittgenstein illustrate Frankfurt's conception of bullshit?
2. How is Frankfurt's understanding of bullshit related to (and sometimes different from) Max Black's definition of "humbug" and the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of "bull session", "bull", and "bullshit"? Why is an instance of bullshit not simply an instance of lying? How does Frankfurt justify his claim that "bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are"?
3. Do you think that Frankfurt thinks philosophy is bullshit? Do you agree with such an account of the relationship between philosophy and bullshit? Is philosophy bullshit?